

# Orthodoxy and Catholicism

by Fr. Theodore Pulcini

**“Orthodoxy and Catholicism—they’re both pretty much the same. Right?”**

Well, as a matter of fact, though they share many similarities and a common heritage, there are significant differences between these two religious bodies. These differences have been the cause of great confusion on the part of members from both confessions, not to mention those looking on from Protestant or non-traditional backgrounds.

In *Orthodoxy and Catholicism*, a former Roman Catholic chronicles his own journey to the Orthodox Faith, and examines the critical issues that influenced his decision. These issues include papal authority, the filioque controversy, and the “new” dogmas of the Catholic Church.

Written in a thoughtful, non-confrontational style, *Orthodoxy and Catholicism* describes the basic differences, providing a clear apologetic from the Orthodox perspective.

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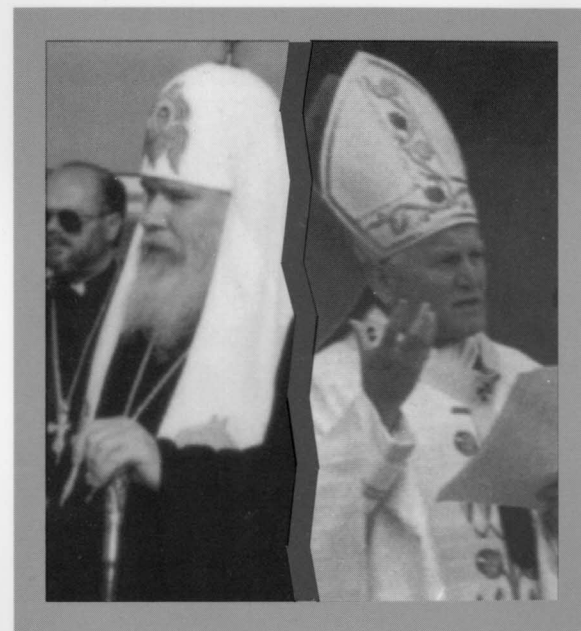
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# ORTHODOXY AND CATHOLICISM



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## What Are the Differences?

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*by Father Theodore Pulcini*

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Every so often you hear someone say, “Orthodox Christianity—let’s see, isn’t that sort of like the Eastern branch of the Roman Catholic Church?” No, not really. Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism are distinct bodies with significant differences.

In discussing these differences, my approach will be primarily autobiographical. Almost two decades ago I began a long and arduous process of discernment that led to my conversion from Roman Catholicism to Orthodoxy.

At the outset, I must state that I am grateful for my Catholic upbringing, which imparted to me a sober appreciation of Christian doctrine and a healthy experience of spiritual discipline. My embracing of Orthodoxy occurred not as a result of hostility toward my religious past, but in fulfillment of it. It was my upbringing in Roman Catholicism that prepared me to recognize the light of pristine Christianity that still shines in Orthodoxy. That recognition began during my college years as a result of theological and historical inquiries.

## A CLASH OF VIEWPOINTS

After years of Catholic religious education, I had come to accept the Rome-centered view of Church history: that Christ had chosen Peter to be the head of the Church, the first pope, and that the church founded by Peter, the church of Rome, from the very beginning had a preeminence and superiority over all of Christendom. Moreover, the bishops of Rome who succeeded Peter inherited his power as the head of the Church and the vicar of Christ on earth, down to the present day.

Rebelliousness, I was taught, led the Protestants to reject this divinely established structure of Church authority, giving rise to their heretical teachings and endless divisions. In my religious training, the Catholic view of Church history had been opposed to the Protestant view, which was presented as seriously deficient.

In college, however, I began to see that history is always written from a particular perspective. There is no such thing as objective history; all historians tell their story from a particular viewpoint. Thus, in an attempt to arrive at an honest appreciation of another Christian historical perspective, I began to explore the Protestant account of early Christianity.

To be sure, I detected flaws in it. It seemed to me that, in reaction to the abuses in medieval Catholicism, Protestantism had gone too far; it had “thrown out the baby with the bath water,” so to speak. For example, the Protestant view did not adequately account for the sacramental and hierarchical aspects of the early Church so clearly described in ancient Christian texts; it simply dismissed them as evidence of early “corruptions” and “aberrations.” Nevertheless, the Protestant critique of the Catholic viewpoint forced me to confront some serious questions I would otherwise have ignored.

## VEXING QUESTIONS

For example, even if Peter did enjoy a sort of preeminence among the Apostles, did that mean Christ intended for him to have the kind

of primacy among bishops and the sort of universal power over the entire Church that the later popes claimed? When Christ said, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18), was the “rock” on which the Church was to be built the person of Peter and his successors, or was it the confession that Peter had just made: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16)? It seemed if Christ did confer on Peter a sort of preeminence, it was by virtue of this confession of faith; it alone could serve as the foundation for the Church.

And if Christ gave to Peter the power to loose and to bind (“And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” Matthew 16:19), he gave the same power to all the disciples as well (“Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” Matthew 18:18).

Furthermore, whatever Peter’s privileged position was in the early Christian community, it certainly had little in common with the prerogatives claimed by later bishops of Rome. To say that the later papal office was simply a “fleshing out,” a logical development, of the role of the Apostle Peter in the primitive Church seemed more and more untenable to me.

And what about the Catholic teachings that precipitated the Reformation—the doctrines concerning indulgences and purgatory? What of the Roman dogmatic pronouncements on the Immaculate Conception, papal infallibility, and the Assumption of Mary, all rejected by Protestants?

On the one hand, the Protestant critique raised vexing questions that pointed to flaws in the Catholic viewpoint. On the other hand, the Protestant viewpoint did not seem to present a satisfactory alternative. I was stymied.

It was only gradually that I came to realize that my dilemma was the result of seeing these questions solely in terms of the dispute



between Catholicism and Protestantism. In the course of my reading, however, I saw that another perspective—the most ancient of all—was relevant to my search: the perspective of the Orthodox Church.

## A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

Who were the Orthodox, anyway? I had had some exposure to them. Their churches dot the landscape of western Pennsylvania, where I grew up. I had many Orthodox classmates throughout my years in elementary and secondary school. But I had simply written off Orthodoxy as a sort of “underdeveloped” Catholicism, embraced by certain ethnic groups, such as Russians, Greeks, and Serbs, whose fierce tribal loyalties motivated them to set up their own national churches and to reject what I considered to be the more mature, universal Christianity of Catholicism.

But as I continued to read, I discovered that, no matter how Orthodox Christianity had been disfigured in the ethnic enclaves of western Pennsylvania, it nonetheless saw itself as a universal Faith—indeed *the ancient Catholic Faith*—that refused to fall prey to what it saw as serious aberrations that had developed in Roman Catholicism.

These aberrations fell into five categories: (1) the understanding of the papacy; (2) the *filioque*; (3) the teaching regarding purgatory and indulgences; (4) the “new dogmas”—the Immaculate Conception, papal infallibility, and the Assumption; and (5) various practices enforced in the Roman Church, such as Communion under one species (the laity receiving only bread and not wine), the separation of baptism and confirmation (chrismation), and compulsory clerical celibacy.

I saw that many of the very same criticisms adduced by Protestantism against Roman Catholicism were voiced by Orthodoxy as well. But I felt obliged to take the Orthodox critique much more seriously. After all, Protestantism emerged in force only in the sixteenth century; the Orthodox Church, on the other hand, traced its origins all the way back to the Apostles themselves. Even the Roman

Church conceded as much, recognizing the validity of the Orthodox Church’s sacraments and the venerable antiquity of its institutions. It considered the Orthodox Church to be “schismatic” (separated), but not “heretical” (teaching false doctrine).

The Orthodox Church, on the other hand, had the boldness to label the Roman Church both schismatic and heretical! On what grounds could it make such claims? I began to investigate the differences between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism in an attempt to discern which stance was more defensible.

## THE PAPACY

To my surprise, the Orthodox did not in principle deny the primacy of the pope of Rome. But they did differ from the Roman Church in their understanding of it.

According to the Orthodox, the pope of Rome enjoyed a status of “first among equals.” That is, all bishops are fundamentally equal; there is no such thing as an *episcopus episcoporum*, a “bishop of the bishops.” Certain bishops in Orthodoxy—patriarchs, metropolitans, archbishops—enjoy special status *among* their brother bishops but not *above* them. They lead other bishops by forming consensus, not by issuing peremptory decrees. In other words, no bishop in Orthodoxy has the right to push aside a brother bishop and impose his will in that bishop’s territory. The pope of Rome, on the other hand, claims such a prerogative.

Which position was correct? It seemed to me that in the ancient Church it was the Orthodox position that prevailed. Church historians recognize that, in organizing itself, the ancient Church followed what is called the “principle of accommodation.” That is, the cities of greatest importance in the Roman Empire came to be recognized as the primary bishoprics in the early Church.

Gradually, five cities of great prominence in the empire emerged as the five preeminent “patriarchal” sees in the Church: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Rome held a

primacy of influence among them—not because the church there had been founded by Peter (after all, Peter had been the bishop of the church in Antioch before he ever saw Rome!) but because it was the church of the capital city. This is why Constantinople held the second position of honor—because Constantine in the fourth century made it the new imperial capital.

Of the five principal centers of the early Church, four of them—Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem—were all in the East. They could maintain a system of checks and balances among themselves. If any claimed too great an influence for itself, it could be readily challenged by the other nearby centers.

Not so with Rome. Isolated from the other centers, it was the only patriarchal see in the West and gradually came to develop an exaggerated sense of its authority. There was no other patriarchal see nearby to counter its claims. Rome thus ascribed ever greater prerogatives to itself.

Gradually, as a result of political developments, it did become possible for the pope of Rome to exercise wider and wider sway throughout the entire Church. To shore up this newfound power, the doctrine of universal papal jurisdiction was articulated—in clear opposition to the practice of the ancient Church.

It thus seemed that the Roman doctrine of papal primacy was an innovation that had no precedent in early Christianity; it was formulated as a “theological justification” for the political power which historical circumstances had conferred upon the Roman church. It became clear to me that the Orthodox position was far more consistent with the understanding of authority in the early Church.

What is more, I was struck by the Orthodox Church’s willingness even today to recognize Rome as the first among equals if only Rome would reject its pretensions. In other words, if Rome again affirmed the early Church’s understanding of authority, the Orthodox Church would again recognize Rome’s primacy. I therefore came to see the division between the Eastern and Western churches as the result not

of Orthodoxy’s stubborn refusal to recognize papal authority, but of Roman Catholicism’s unjustifiable papal claims.

## THE FILIOQUE

Then there was the dispute between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics regarding the *filioque*. This Latin word, meaning “and the Son,” was added unilaterally by the Roman Church to the original text of the creed that had been composed at the councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381). This creed originally read, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father.” This is exactly what Jesus taught when He said, “But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me” (John 15:26).

Gradually the Western church added the *filioque*, so that the text came to read, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.” This gave rise to the Roman doctrine of the “double procession,” according to which the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but from both the Father and the Son.

The thought of such Western Fathers as Tertullian (d. c. 220) and Augustine (d. 430) paved the way for this alteration. It seems the actual insertion of the *filioque* was made at the Council of Toledo, held in Spain in 589. The addition did not remain a purely Spanish phenomenon, however. It gradually spread to France and Germany.

The propagation of the *filioque* was part of Charlemagne’s agenda. He flaunted the Western addition to the creed before flabbergasted Eastern Christians and incessantly attempted to force Pope Hadrian I to insert it officially into the creed. The pope, however, did not yield to the emperor’s demands; he conceded to Charlemagne that the doctrine of the *filioque* was admissible but insisted that the doctrine of the single procession (that the Spirit proceeded from the Father



alone) was consonant with both the Fathers of antiquity and the Tradition of the Church of Rome. Nevertheless, Charlemagne persisted. Gradually, use of the *filioque* spread throughout the Western church.

The Eastern reaction against the *filioque* was two-pronged. On the one hand, the Greeks objected to any addition to the creed. The councils that had produced the words of the creed had clearly forbidden any additions to, or subtractions from, it. On the other hand, the Eastern Church was convinced that, from a theological point of view, the doctrine of the *filioque* was incorrect.

In the ninth century, the patriarch of Constantinople, Photius, wrote an encyclical condemning a number of Western “innovations” (doctrines and practices not held by the early Church), among which was Rome’s addition of the *filioque* to the creed. He actually accused the Roman pope, Nicholas, of heresy in this matter and excommunicated him!

The addition to the creed was thus established as a perennial point of contention between the churches of East and West, and remains so until this day. The renowned Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky observed, “Whether we like it or not, the question of the procession of the Holy Spirit has been the sole dogmatic ground for the separation of East and West” (*In the Image and Likeness of God*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974, p. 71).

As I read about this issue, I must admit that I did not understand all of the fine points of Trinitarian doctrine brought up in the arguments between the East and West. But I did see one thing clearly: the Orthodox Church to this day retains the original text of the Nicene Creed, while the Roman Church uses an altered text. It seemed improper to me that Rome should unilaterally tamper with a profession of faith that had been solemnly approved by the whole Church in council.

As I became more and more convinced of the validity of the Orthodox Church’s stance on the matter of the *filioque*, I was

encouraged to consider other Orthodox criticisms of Rome. I turned next to the issue of purgatory and indulgences.

## PURGATORY AND INDULGENCES

I had been sensitized to the issue of purgatory and indulgences through my reading of historical texts relating to the rupture between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. It was, after all, the issue of selling indulgences that sparked the fires of Reformation in the sixteenth century. I knew that Orthodox, like Roman Catholics, prayed for the departed. Did that mean they also accepted purgatorian doctrine and the related teachings concerning indulgences?

The answer to this question was a resounding “no.” Roman Catholicism justifies its practice of praying for the dead as follows: Even after a sinful action is forgiven, there still remains a “temporal punishment” due to that sin which must be expiated. If someone should die after having been forgiven (in a state of grace) but before having the opportunity to expiate the temporal punishment, that person is assured of heaven. But before being able to enter it, he or she must spend some time in purgation—hence the doctrine of purgatory.

This temporal punishment due to sin can be expiated not only through penitential effort but also through a “gift” of the church. By this scheme the church draws from the infinite merits earned by Christ and the saints and applies them to a particular person so that all or part of that person’s temporal punishment due to sin is expiated. This “gift” is called an indulgence. It can be used to expiate one’s own temporal punishment due to sin, or it can, through intercessory prayer, be applied to a “suffering soul” in purgatory, so that the soul may then enter the fullness of heaven’s joys.

Orthodoxy, I discovered, finds such reasoning excessively mechanistic and quite foreign to the spirit of the gospel. Yes, Orthodoxy believes in a state of existence between the time of death and the dawning of the Last Day, but it is a place of rest quite different from

# WHAT DOES THE ORTHODOX CHURCH BELIEVE?

## — And How Do Roman Catholic Belief & Practice Differ? —



### DOCTRINE

### WORSHIP

### GOVERNMENT

#### ORTHODOX

Basic Tenets	The Bible	Councils & Creeds	The Trinity	Sin & Salvation	Sacraments/ Liturgy	The Eucharist	The Virgin Mary	Saints	Icons	Foundations	Bishops/Patriarchs	Priests & Deacons
All Orthodox doctrine is founded on the written Word of God (the Bible), the creeds of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, the canons, and the Holy Tradition of the Church (as expressed in the Church's hymnography, iconography, or otherwise passed on within the Church from the Apostles to the present day). Holy Tradition is the very life of the Church as inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit. Orthodoxy's basic attitude towards theology stresses mystery and the experience of the incomprehensible.	The Bible is the central written source of doctrine and belief, inspired in its writing by the Holy Spirit. However, the Holy Scriptures must be accepted and interpreted in accordance with the belief which has been handed down by the Holy Fathers and which the Holy Orthodox Church has always held and does now hold. The Canon of the Scriptures includes the Old Testament (including several "Deuterocanonical" books), and the New Testament.	The major creedal statement of the Orthodox Church is the Nicene Creed (literally, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, drawn up by the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea [325] and the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople [381]). The Orthodox Church has not altered this creed in any way over the centuries, and objects to any additions to it. The most important councils, which received universal approval of the entire Church in all places, are called the Seven Ecumenical Councils.	The prime doctrinal dogma of the Trinity defines God as One God (one Divine Nature, with one Divine action and will) in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God the Father is the Fountainhead and source of the Trinity. God the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. Through His Incarnation and the <i>hypostatic union</i> , Christ is one Divine Person, but has two natures; He is both fully God and fully Man. The Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father (the phrase "and the Son" [ <i>filioque</i> ] is not added).	Sin is an unnatural state of man, brought about by the distortion of God's original creation. After the Fall of Adam, all men became subject to an ancestral curse and were made subject to death. It is the goal of human life not to sin, and to be restored to our original "god-likeness." But, in fact, all people <i>do</i> sin. It is only possible to be freed from sin by the saving work of Christ, who forgives the sins of the world through His abundant mercy. By His Resurrection, Christ defeated our ultimate enemy, death. Salvation is a lifelong process, involving active cooperation with the work of Christ. There is an intermediate state of the soul between death and the final day of judgment, during which souls benefit from the prayers of the faithful.	All of life is recognized as mystical or sacramental. There are seven sacraments that are the principal manifestations of Christ's grace: baptism, chrismation, the Eucharist, confession, ordination, marriage, and anointing with oil. Through their operation and reception, we obtain grace and blessings from on high. Worship and prayer in the Orthodox Church are liturgical. The celebration of the Holy Eucharist is called the Divine Liturgy. The sacraments of initiation (baptism, chrismation, and first Eucharist) are normally administered at the same time.	In the Divine Liturgy, under the mystical forms of the holy bread and wine, the faithful truly partake of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, unto the remission of sins, and unto life eternal. The exact manner of the Real Presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements is held as a "mystery." During Holy Communion, both the consecrated bread and wine are given to lay communicants.	Mary is venerated as Ever-Virgin Mother of God. She is given the title "Theotokos," meaning "God-bearer," because He who is born of her is from all eternity God. Her human nature is in every way the same as that of other men and women. Believers request the special prayers and intercession of Mary, as one who was and is close to Christ in a unique manner. Feast days celebrated in her honor include: Conception, Nativity, Presentation, Dormition (Falling Asleep), and the Annunciation.	It is proper to reverence and invoke the saints who reign on high with Christ; their prayers and intercessions before God avail with God unto our salvation. It is well pleasing in the sight of God that we should give homage to the relics of the saints, glorified through incorruption, as memorials of their virtue. It is proper to pray for the departed, for the repose of their souls and for their salvation.	Images of Christ, of the Ever-Virgin Mother, and of the other saints are worthy of being possessed and honored—not as idols, but so that, through contemplation of them, we may be incited to piety and the emulation of the deeds of the holy persons represented by the images. Icons are painted in such a way as to show a divine reality, and are not meant to be "realistic" portrayals.	The Foundation, Head, and Great High Priest and Chief Shepherd of the Universal Church is our Lord Jesus Christ. Bishops, pastors, and teachers are appointed by Him to rule the Church. The Guide and Pilot of this Church is the Holy Spirit. The government of the Church is hierarchical. All major Church decisions are made on a conciliar basis (by council). General decisions of councils are handed down as creeds (doctrinal decisions) and canons (norms or rules of Church practice or ethics, not laws in a modern sense).	The Holy Apostles received from our Lord equal spiritual power. All bishops are equally the successors of the Apostles. The bishops of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem—governing the five ancient Christian centers—were given special honor and the title of patriarch, and the patriarch of Rome was given status as the "first among equals." (The bishop of Constantinople is now given a special title of "Ecumenical Patriarch" of all Orthodox Churches.) No individual bishop is superior to the Ecumenical Councils, nor is any bishop considered infallible.	The priesthood was established by Christ Himself. In the apostolic era, it was organized into three ranks or degrees (bishop, priest, deacon). The clergy are ministers of God's grace through all of the sacraments. Following the practice of the ancient Church, celibacy is not imposed as a requirement for ordination to the diaconate or priesthood (however, marriages are not performed after ordination). Bishops, drawn from the ranks of monastics, may not marry. The priesthood (all three ranks) is confined to men.

#### ROMAN CATHOLIC

The basic foundations of Catholic theology are essentially the same, except that the general attitude towards theology stresses precise definitions and a process of deduction based upon human reason (Scholasticism or rationalism rather than mysticism).	The basic belief regarding the Bible is essentially the same, except that there are differences in interpretation of the Scriptures in several areas, and differing traditions accepted by the two Churches. There are also a few differences in which Deuterocanonical books are included in the Old Testament canon.	All of the Seven Ecumenical Councils are accepted, but the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed was changed by the addition of the <i>filioque</i> clause (see "Trinity" section). The Roman Catholic Church accepts as binding the decrees of several later councils which are not recognized by the Orthodox Church, and <i>vice versa</i> . Papal decrees have in some instances been set above or against the decisions of earlier councils and creeds.	In regards to the dogma of the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father, the Roman Catholic Church, in about the ninth century, added the <i>filioque</i> clause. (This addition contradicts the precise revelation of Scripture [John 15:26] and confuses the inner relations of the Persons of the Trinity.)	According to the Roman understanding of "original sin," a stain of inherited guilt is passed down from Adam, as a result of his sin, to the rest of the human race. Even after a sinful action is forgiven, there sometimes remains a temporal punishment due to that sin which must be expiated. Those who die with their sin forgiven but not expiated, must spend time after death in purgation (purgatory). Infinite merits earned by Christ and the saints can be passed on to another individual by the Church through "indulgences."	The Catholic Church's view of sacrament and liturgy is primarily the same. The celebration of the Holy Eucharist is called the Mass. There have always been some differing liturgical practices, but in recent years there has been an accelerated amount of liturgical change and new practices introduced. The sacraments of initiation are most often performed separately, and in a different order (infants are baptized; First Communion comes at a later age; and confirmation or chrismation at a still later age).	The Catholic Church, in regards to the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, holds to a belief in transubstantiation (a legalistic, medieval explanation for how the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ). Traditionally, during Communion lay people receive only the consecrated bread, not the wine (however, practices are in transition).	The Roman Catholic Church shares with the Orthodox Church a deep love for and veneration of the Virgin Mary. There is, however, one significant difference in emphasis and belief. In Catholic belief, from the first moment of her conception, the Virgin Mary was, by the singular grace of God, kept free from all stain of original sin (the Immaculate Conception). There is also an understanding that <i>all</i> graces flow from God through Mary, as "Mediatrice."	Because of the diverging history of the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church after the Schism, the more recent saints recognized in one Church are not recognized in the other, and <i>vice versa</i> . In addition, there is a very different approach to the official canonization of saints.	Icons are also accepted and used in the Catholic Church. Statues are more commonly used than in Orthodoxy. In general, there is a more "realistic" or "romantic" style of art used in the Catholic Church than in the Orthodox Church.	Traditionally, the Catholic Church has had more of a structured, hierarchical administrative style, a greater emphasis on law, and a greater stress on obedience than in Orthodoxy. (However, the Church is now in a period of transition in which there is less emphasis on obedience and a greater degree of independence.)	In the Roman Catholic view, the Apostle Peter is seen as having been uniquely chosen by Christ to be the head of the Church, and the bishop or patriarch of Rome is seen as his unique successor. On this basis, the bishop of Rome is given pre-eminent authority and superiority over all of Christianity down to this day (supremacy of the Pope). Official statements made by the Pope <i>ex cathedra</i> (from the throne) are considered infallible, and the whole Church is bound by these teachings (infallibility of the Pope).	In the Catholic Church it is compulsory for priests to remain celibate. The priesthood is presently confined to men; however, a growing movement is pushing for women's ordination.
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the purgatory of Roman Catholic doctrine. The idea of purgatory is based on an obviously legalistic notion that the soul must “pay what it owes” before being admitted to the full joys of heaven.

This teaching makes the Orthodox Christian uneasy on two counts: First, Orthodoxy avoids understanding salvation in legalistic terms. Because Christ made a complete sacrifice for our sins, once we are forgiven, we are forgiven. There is no need to provide expiation for some “residual” debt which remains after one is forgiven. Thus, Orthodoxy rejects the whole idea of temporal punishment due to sin.

Second, Orthodoxy teaches there is no experiencing the “full joy” of heaven (which a soul supposedly would experience, according to the Roman Catholic understanding, once it has undergone sufficient purgation) until the Last Day. The “intermediate state,” in the Orthodox view, is therefore not a state between heaven and hell in which some souls must spend time before entering heaven. It is, rather, a state of repose where *all* souls rest in anticipation of the Last Day (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). In that repose they have a foretaste of their eternal reward or punishment, which will be fixed on the Last Day.

In the meantime, the Orthodox Church teaches, these souls benefit from the prayers of the faithful. These prayers, as acts of love, comfort the souls of the departed and better prepare them to stand confident of God’s grace and mercy at the dread judgment seat of Christ on the Last Day.

The Orthodox Church gives no mechanistic explanation of how these prayers benefit the departed. It simply affirms the ancient Christian teaching that such prayers are efficacious in preparing the souls of the departed for the final judgment. For example, Saint Paul interceded for the departed Onesiphorus when he wrote, “The Lord grant to him that he may find mercy from the Lord in that Day” (2 Timothy 1:18). In this attitude, the Orthodox Church much more closely reflects the viewpoint of the early Church and abstains from

the more speculative and legalistic justifications for such prayers which characterize the Roman Catholic doctrines of purgatory and indulgences.

These late doctrines seemed to me to be *innovations* without a firm basis in the teaching of the Scriptures and the early Church. But as my research continued, I discovered that these innovations were not the only ones that had found their way into Roman Catholic teaching.

## THE “NEW DOGMAS”

I had always taken great pride in three distinctively Catholic teachings: the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception, papal infallibility, and the Assumption. As dogmas, they must be accepted by all Catholics who desire to be in good standing with their church. So, of course, I accepted them fully—until I developed some historical perspective on how they had become part of Catholic teaching.

I was shocked to find out that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (which asserts that “from the first moment of her conception the Blessed Virgin Mary was, by the singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of mankind, kept free from all stain of original sin”) was defined only in 1854 by Pope Pius IX in his bull *Ineffabilis Deus*. The dogma was only a little over a century old! And I found it futile to argue that even though the definition was late, the teaching had been universally held beforehand. Not so! Right up to the very time of the definition, various parties contested its orthodoxy.

What I found most disturbing in my reading was that the Orthodox objected to the doctrine not so much because of its proclamation of Mary as immaculate (indeed, the Orthodox liturgy repeatedly refers to Mary as “all-holy,” “immaculate,” and “most blessed”) but because of the erroneous understanding of original sin underlying it.

The Orthodox, I discovered, objected to the Roman Catholic understanding of original sin as the stain of inherited guilt passed

down from Adam, as a result of his sin, to the rest of the human race. The Orthodox saw this notion of original sin as skewed, drawing almost exclusively on the thought of Saint Augustine. He had virtually ignored the teachings of the Eastern Fathers, who tended to see original sin not as inherited guilt but rather as “the ancestral curse” by which human beings were alienated from the divine life and thus became subject to corruption and death.

As I read further, I discovered that Saint Augustine’s—and consequently, the Roman Catholic Church’s—view was the result of the faulty Latin translation of Romans 5:12, the New Testament passage on which the teaching of original sin is based. When the original Greek is properly translated it reads, “Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and death spread to all in that (*eph ho*) all sinned . . .” The Latin which Augustine used rendered the *eph ho* (“in that”) as *in quo* (“in whom”), meaning “in Adam.” Thus the passage was misconstrued as saying that all sinned in Adam, that all shared in the guilt of his original disobedience.

It is understandable how the Catholic doctrine of original sin followed from this misinterpretation. It is also easy to see why the Orthodox rejected the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Because they understood original sin in terms of the ancestral curse of human mortality, they saw Pius IX’s dogma as amounting to no less than an assertion of Mary’s immortality! That is, by saying that Mary was free from original sin, the Roman Church in effect was saying that Mary was not mortal! She was therefore not like the rest of the human race. This was something no Orthodox Christian could accept. In fact, Orthodoxy calls Mary “the first of the redeemed”—the first human to receive the great blessing of salvation now available to all mankind.

I sadly concluded that the erroneous Roman understanding of original sin had led to another erroneous teaching, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The dogma was clearly an unwarranted innovation.

It was much the same with the dogma of papal infallibility. This

doctrine asserts that when the pope speaks *ex cathedra*, “from the throne,” or officially, on matters of faith and morals, he teaches infallibly. Thus the whole Church is bound by his teaching.

This doctrine, defined at the First Vatican Council in 1870 (sixteen years after the dogma of the Immaculate Conception), is also an innovation. It does not articulate ancient Christian understanding of the role of the See of Rome in the universal Church, and as a result, the Orthodox Church rejected it. I was surprised to find out that a faction within the Roman Church itself rejected this doctrine as well, thus giving rise to the so-called Old Catholic Churches.

Orthodox react less negatively to the Roman Catholic dogma of the Assumption than to the two others just discussed. This dogma, which affirms that Mary, “having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory,” was defined by Pope Pius XII in 1950. The event is commemorated on August 15 of the Catholic ecclesiastical calendar—the same date on which the Orthodox celebrate Mary’s falling asleep, or Dormition (death), rather than her bodily assumption.

To be sure, a strong and early tradition existed in both East and West that after Mary’s death the Lord assumed her into heaven. In Psalm 45, a messianic psalm, the Church Fathers interpreted the phrase, “At Your right hand stands the queen” (v. 9) as a reference to Mary’s presence with the Lord now. But her assumption is not a required belief for Orthodox, though it is a widely respected theological opinion. Why, the Orthodox wonder, should such a belief, hardly central to the Christian proclamation of salvation, be dogmatized and put on the same level as other truly central dogmas like the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and the two natures of Christ?

In short, in examining the “new” Roman Catholic doctrines more closely, I found the Orthodox criticism of them to be quite justified.

## DIFFERENCES IN PRACTICE

Similarly, I found that in those cases in which Roman Catholic



practices diverge from Orthodox practices, the latter are usually more faithful to ancient Christian practice than the former. That is, the Roman Catholic discipline usually represents an innovation.

Let me cite a few examples.

The Orthodox have consistently given Communion under both species; that is, both the consecrated bread and wine are given to all communicants. Roman Catholics normally give lay communicants the consecrated bread alone. The Orthodox practice is by far the more ancient. Recognizing this, the Second Vatican Council recommended restoration of Communion under both species, even though this is still not done in a typical parish on a typical Sunday.

The Orthodox administer the sacraments of initiation—baptism, chrismation (confirmation), and Eucharist—jointly, just as the early Church did. The Roman Catholic Church has separated them and even disrupted their normal order, administering baptism, then Eucharist, and then confirmation (chrismation). In some places, Catholics recognize the greater antiquity of the Orthodox practice and are attempting to restore it within their own church.

Following the practice of the ancient Church, the Orthodox do not insist that celibacy be imposed as a requirement for ordination to the priesthood. The vast majority of Orthodox parish priests are married men. The Roman Catholic policy of compulsory clerical celibacy is of medieval origin. Again, many Catholics today are challenging the wisdom of their present discipline and advocating a return to the more ancient discipline as observed in Orthodoxy.

### A DIFFERENT “FEEL”

Even apart from all the particular differences between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, I detected a different orientation in the two faiths. The Orthodox experience of Christianity, while having many elements in common with Catholicism, has a distinctive “feel,” a way of thinking and of doing things.

Perhaps most significantly, it became readily apparent to me that

Orthodoxy viewed theology less as an exercise in reason than as an attempt to express an ineffable mystery. Theology in the Catholic West seemed to be largely a matter of precise definition and syllogistic deduction, highly philosophical and rationalistic in nature. In the Orthodox East theology seemed to be largely a matter of doxology, of bowing in reverent wonder before the ineffable; it was less concerned with philosophical precision than with experiencing the incomprehensible. This attitude finds expression in the unparalleled beauty and majesty of Orthodox worship.

It occurred to me that, if Christianity may be likened to a pool, the Catholic West spent a great deal of time describing that pool and analyzing its waters. The Orthodox East preferred just to dive in! I did not detect the sort of “dryness” in Orthodox theology that I had in the Scholasticism of the Catholic tradition. The more experiential emphasis that Catholicism was attempting to restore to its theology in the aftermath of Vatican II was already present in the theological tradition of the Orthodox East.

Moreover, although I respected and stood in awe before the magnificent organization of the Roman Church, I was growing tired of the legalism that seemed to pervade the Catholic experience, even in the days of *aggiornamento* (“updating”) following Vatican II. To be sure, I saw that things were not so clear-cut, so black and white, in the Orthodox system. Instead there was a tantalizing sort of freedom to be found there, a freedom which encouraged one to be *responsible*, not just *obedient*.

The legalistic emphasis of the Catholic Church, I discovered, had a profound effect not only on its administrative style but also on its theological orientation. Salvation, for example, was explained in legal terms; in dying, Christ paid the sentence that had been justly imposed on the human race as a result of sin—death and condemnation. Salvation was thus explained largely in terms of expiation of debt and removal of a just sentence—legal categories.

To be honest, I had never found this view very satisfying. Why



would a loving God require such a price? Was the Father really so angry and vengeful that he would require the death of his own Son in order to be appeased? I was looking for a better understanding of salvation, and in Orthodoxy I found it.

## TO BE SAVED IS TO BE TRANSFORMED

In the Orthodox view, to be saved is not to be freed from a sentence imposed by God. Rather, it is to be transformed by Him, to be restored to what He meant us to be! I learned the principle on which the whole Orthodox spiritual tradition is based: God became a human being so that human beings could become divine. This process of divinization is known as *theosis*. To be sure, we human beings can never become God by nature, but the human being was never meant to exist in separation from God. Salvation is meant to draw us back into communion with God.

Only in being “energized” by grace (which for the Orthodox, I discovered, is not a created commodity but the very Presence of the Uncreated One conveyed to his creature) can human nature be what it is truly meant to be. When it speaks of divinization, Orthodox theology is really speaking of true *humanization*, the restoration of human beings to the state in which they were created. In that sense we are all meant to be “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

Once I discovered this fundamental doctrine of Orthodoxy, a whole new understanding of Christianity opened up to me. *Theosis* made me appreciate prayer and the sacraments anew, as transforming encounters with God. I began to see an experiential unity between theology and spirituality. The truth of the gospel became evident to me with a fresh clarity. Whatever Orthodoxy was in its various aspects, I experienced it as profoundly *true*. And once I perceived this truth, I had only to devote myself to it.

## TO LIVE THE APOSTOLIC FAITH

My journey to Orthodoxy took nearly seven years, but the struggle

was well worth it. Despite all its struggles—and it has many—the Orthodox Church has maintained, without distorting addition or damaging detraction, the Faith of the Apostles, the Faith of the ancient Church. This is enough for me, and has been for me the source of a quiet but perennial joy.

The Orthodox Church is not politically powerful, or wealthy, or particularly erudite. But it possesses the indwelling of that Spirit who bears witness to Christ, the Spirit who fosters the experience of the risen Lord that has enabled all true Christians to believe. To be Orthodox is to have access to the Christian life and experience in its pristine form. For Orthodox Christians, without ever impugning the goodness and sincerity of other Christians, affirm that it is in the Orthodox Church that the fullness of Christian truth is to be found.

I glorify the God who made me hunger for this fullness of truth and then graciously permitted me to find it!

## **Introductory books on the Orthodox Church:**

\*Note: prices listed were current as of January, 2001. Prices are subject to change. When ordering directly from publishers, please enclose additional funds to cover tax and postage & handling.

### **THE ORTHODOX CHURCH**

By Bishop Kallistos Ware (Published by Penguin) \$14.95

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### **THE ORTHODOX FAITH (4 volumes)**

By Father Thomas Hopko (Published by Orthodox Christian Publ. Center) \$29.95 set

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